

## Guest editorial: The Miracle of the Market

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The Miracle of the Market by Jacob G. Hornberger

In preparation for the two recent back-to-back blizzards, D.C. residents were emptying the shelves of neighborhood grocery stores. Notwithstanding the pre-blizzard panic buying, what's interesting is that no one was freaking out about whether the stores would be adequately stocked after the blizzards.

After all, think about it: there is absolutely no government planning that goes into what is stocked in grocery stores. No federal Department of Food. No local or state planning commission. No grocery boards. No bureaucrats or bureaucracies. No laws requiring grocery stores to be well-stocked. No rules and regulations dictating how much of each food item, including bread, milk, and chicken, needs to appear on the shelves.

So, how in the world do grocery stores get stocked without government planning or direction? How is it that so much food appears, almost by magic, within a day or two after most of the shelves have been emptied? Indeed, how do grocery stores manage to have more than enough food for people throughout the year given that no government department or agency is doing the planning and issuing food directives?

Let's look at the situation another way. Suppose that in 1900, it was decided that food was just too important an item to be left to the free market. To ensure that there would always be enough food for people, state and local governments took over the grocery-store industry, just as they took over the education industry. To provide support for grocery stores, the U.S. government established the federal Department of Food to provide grants and set standards for the grocery stores, just as the U.S. Department of Education does for state and local public schools.

So, imagine that we're here in 2010, having lived under more than 100 years of a system of government-run grocery stores. Wouldn't people be incessantly complaining about the shoddy quality of products and services, as they constantly do with the state-run schools?

Along come libertarians and say the same thing about the grocery business that they say about the education business. Get government out of the grocery business, at all levels — local, state, and federal. Abolish the federal Department of Food. Sell off all the grocery stores. Abolish all the taxes needed to run the grocery stores. Separate food and state, just as our ancestors separated church and state. Let the free market reign in the grocery-store industry.

What would today's statist say? They would say the same things they say when libertarians call for the same solution in education. "Where would the poor get their food? There would only be grocery stores for the rich. How could we count on the free market to make sure that there was the right amount of food for each grocery store? What if some grocery stores went empty while others were plentiful? How could we be sure that each grocery store received the correct quantities of each item? You libertarians are dreamers. Do you honestly believe that you could leave something as important as grocery stores to the free market?"

Yet, today no one gives a free market in food a second thought. Every day, people have a wide range of grocery stores from which to choose, each one vying for his business. Practically every day — blizzards being a possible exception — every one of those grocery stores is packed with food, all with a dizzying array of choices.

And it's all accomplished through the miracle of the market, with no government planning or direction. And no one gets freaked out about the fact that it all happens without government intervention. People just take it for granted.

Now, while we're on the subject of a free market in the grocery-store industry, can we talk about the same thing in the context of the education industry?

• *Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation. other blogs may be found at [www.fff.org/blog/index.asp](http://www.fff.org/blog/index.asp).*